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ABSTRACT

This longitudinal multi-method study assessed changes in institutional autonomy at 30 community colleges in one state. Six years after legislated changes intended to increase autonomy and create a uniform fiscal operation system had been implemented, the study found that changes in autonomy in selected fiscal, personnel, and operational matters were inconsistent and incomplete. Investigators concluded that as the resource dependency theory suggests, connections between state-legislated changes and real change at the local level are complicated and slow to develop. The paper reviews the conceptual framework; discusses related institutional characteristics, contextual variables, and political strategies; and lists the measures of fiscal, personnel, and operational autonomy used. The data were based on questionnaires completed for two unpublished institutional autonomy surveys, the first conducted in 1988 just prior to the legislated changes, and the second in 1995; the response rate for both surveys was 100 percent. Tables list the autonomy measures and some survey data. (Contains 33 references.) (CH)

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A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY IN THIRTY COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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Jean Endo
Editor
AIR Forum Publications

ABSTRACT

This is a longitudinal, multi-method study of the legislated change in autonomy among the thirty community colleges in a single state system. The legislation was intended to increase the autonomy of the community colleges and to create a uniform fiscal operating system. Six years after its implementation, we find the resulting changes in autonomy in selected fiscal, personnel, and operational matters are inconsistent and incomplete. The continuing autonomy disparities among the thirty community colleges show that the Resource Dependence Model is at work, and suggest that the connections between state autonomy legislation and real change on the local level are complicated and slow to develop. Despite the legislation, the political dimensions of the regulatory relationship between the community college and the local government prompt the need for collaboration and education, rather than confrontation, in order to effect change.

A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY IN THIRTY COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Introduction

A fundamental characteristic of the relationship between higher education and government is the tension between autonomy and accountability. The dramatic growth and increased costs of higher education since World War II have stimulated challenges to the traditional autonomy of public colleges and universities. Government provides substantial financial support to public higher education; along with its increased dollars has come increased government regulation which, many contend, has significantly eroded the authority of higher education institutions (Carnegie Foundation, 1982; Millett, 1984; Fisher, 1986; Burke, 1994). Educators claim that excessive government controls on fiscal and personnel matters adversely affect the ability of higher education to fulfill its academic mission effectively (Dressel, 1980; Mingle, 1983; Millett, 1984). However, limited empirical evidence exists to support educators' claims.

This multi-method study examines the status of institutional autonomy among thirty community colleges in one state university system. After years of reported local government interference in the operation of these community colleges, legislation was enacted in 1988, referred to in this study as the Autonomy Legislation, that was intended to increase the autonomy of the community colleges in the management of their fiscal affairs and to create a uniform statewide fiscal operating system. Using both quantitative and qualitative resources, this study examines the nature and extent to which the autonomy of these community colleges changed in selected fiscal, personnel, and operational matters six years after the legislation and examines various contextual influences thought to be correlated to institutional autonomy.

Background and Conceptual Framework

Institutional Autonomy: Institutional autonomy refers to the degree to which public higher education can govern itself in financial, personnel, and academic matters without external controls (Dressel, 1980; Levy, 1980). The primary source of external controls on public higher education is, to varying degrees, the federal, state, and local government. Organizationally, if public colleges and universities are viewed as "open systems" influenced by the elements that surround them, their regulatory relationships with government form an

important feature of the external environment. As such, the Resource Dependence Model (Aldrich & Pfeffer, 1976), provides a useful framework through which these regulatory relationships and their subsequent effect on the autonomy of the institutions can be examined.

The study of institutional autonomy distinguishes between substantive and procedural autonomy, defining substantive autonomy as the freedom to protect the academic core of the institution, and defining procedural autonomy as the authority to establish administrative, budgetary, and operational policies and procedures (Berdahl, 1971). While the two domains appear to be well-defined and distinct, many contend that, in practice, there are numerous points of intersection.

This study focuses on procedural autonomy and on the budgetary relationships and patterns of fiscal regulation that exist between public higher education institutions and their external environment. In practice, government can exert controls on public higher education on items such as salary and personnel classification standards, transfers between budget categories, and centralized purchasing procedures (Fonte, 1993). Proponents of government regulation claim that such procedural controls do not adversely affect the substantive academic core of the institution (Berdahl, 1971), and that government, as a major funding source and the authorized taxing agency, has the legitimate right and responsibility to require fiscal accountability of public higher education (Haberaecker, 1987).

Opponents of government regulation, on the other hand, argue that while most procedural controls may appear to focus on fiscal and personnel issues, the cumulative effect of such controls infringes on the authority of educators in academic matters (Darnowski, 1989). Such controls, they contend, reduce campus efficiency, adaptability, and possibly also academic effectiveness (Dressel, 1980), and give only the illusion, not the reality, of accountability (Hines, 1988). The controls create a climate of distrust; they inadvertently reshape the institution in fundamental ways as faculty and administrators spend more time on paperwork than on academic matters; and they change the decision-making context by replacing the judgement of academic deans with that of external auditors (Darnowski, 1989). Moreover, the university is thought to be a unique social institution whose independence is crucial if society is to be well served (Carnegie Foundation, 1982).

The autonomy debate among public community colleges is additionally complex due to the unique governance structure and mission of the community college. Some community colleges, for example those examined in this study, have a joint governance structure that involves both state and local government in the financial support and control of the college. While most autonomy debates among four-year public institutions focus on state government regulations, most autonomy debates among two-year public community colleges focus on local government controls. Furthermore, autonomy is believed to be of increased importance for the community college because of its mission to be responsive to local educational needs, a mission that is thought to intensify the need for managerial autonomy and flexibility in order to effect change quickly (Fonte, 1988).

Contextual Influences: Other than the financial dynamics and budgetary relationships with the external environment, the literature suggests that certain economic, social, and political characteristics tend to promote an atmosphere of regulation, and certain institutional characteristics tend to protect against it. Volkwein, (1987), Fonte, (1988), and Caswell, (1988), have identified three clusters of relevant variables, Institutional Characteristics, Contextual Variables, and Political Action Strategies, that are thought to be correlated to the autonomy of public higher education institutions.

The cluster of Institutional Characteristics suggests that the age, size, mission, historical development, and level of resource dependence of the college are correlated with autonomy (Volkwein, 1985, 1986, 1989). The cluster of Contextual Variables suggests that environmental factors such as geographic location, aspects of the local government, and the perceived quality of the college may also be correlated with autonomy (Volkwein, 1986; Fonte, 1988). Lastly, the cluster of Political Action Strategies suggests that political actions on the part of the college such as grass-roots advocacy, media campaigns, and political action committees that operate within the local political culture may also be correlates to autonomy (Cassell, 1988).

Volkwein's studies of four-year, public, research universities reveals neither strong nor consistent correlations between the major economic, social, and political variables in the environment, on the one hand, and the nature and extent of state regulation of higher education, on the other. He suggests that the low relationship may mean that regulatory

controls are perhaps more idiosyncratic, and therefore, more easily changed than commonly believed by many in higher education (Volkwein and Malik, 1997). This hypothesis is further tested in this study of the local regulatory controls on two-year public community colleges.

Six generalizations summarize our knowledge about the regulatory practices directed at both two-year and four-year public higher education institutions. First, there is a consensus that the amount of regulation has grown in the period between World War II and the 1990's (Carnegie Foundation, 1973, 1982; Millett, 1984; Fisher, 1986). Second, there is wide variation from state to state, and within states, in the nature of academic, financial, and personnel control practices (Volkwein, 1985, 1986; Fonte, 1988). Third, many of the more centralized control practices are widely believed by the higher education community to provide disincentives to good campus management (Mingle, 1983; Hyatt & Santiago, 1983). Fourth, because of this belief, regulatory practices are under attack, especially in those states that treat their universities like public agencies (Carnegie Foundation, 1982; Millett, 1984; McGuinness, 1986). Fifth, the recent changes which have been introduced in a few states tend to be deregulatory in nature (Volkwein & Malik, 1997). And sixth, in spite of recent changes, the dominant aspects of each institution's relationship with the local and/or state government have been relatively enduring (Fisher, 1986; McGuinness, 1986).

Institutional Autonomy among the Community Colleges in this Study: Organizationally, the community colleges examined in this study are part of a common state university system. These community colleges combine state and local government support and control through sharing the college's operating costs among the state, the local government, and the students, and splitting its capital costs evenly between the state and local government. State funding is determined by an enrollment-driven formula budget, local funding is determined by an annual budget negotiated between the college and the local government (the local sponsor), and student tuition is determined by the college board of trustees.

Beginning in the 1960s numerous reports documented claims that the sponsors' intent to ensure accountability for the legitimate and efficient use of public dollars had led, in many cases, to employment and budgetary controls on the college which often extended into aspects of operational and educational policy clearly beyond the sponsors' statutory authority (Peat, Marwick & Mitchell, 1969; Phelan, 1969; Carnegie Foundation, 1982; McGovern, 1984;

Hankin, 1988, 1994; Burke, 1994). Concerns about sponsor influence in the operation of the community colleges culminated in 1985 with an independent commission study that found this state university system to be most overregulated system in the nation (SUNY, 1985).

It was in response to this commission study that the Autonomy Legislation was enacted in 1988. Under the legislation, all of the community colleges would operate under a fiscal system, referred to in this study as the Autonomy Plan, in which the local board of trustees would be directly responsible for the fiscal administration of the college within the terms of the approved budget. The sponsor would maintain the authority to approve the amount and format of budget appropriations but would relinquish its previous authority of a line-item budget pre-approval audit of expenditures.

At the time of the Autonomy Legislation, twenty-five of the thirty community colleges already operated under the Autonomy Plan. Five community colleges operated under a more restrictive system, referred to in this study as the Restricted Plan, and converted to the Autonomy Plan as a result of the legislation. Part A of this study examines the nature and extent to which the autonomy of the community colleges has changed six years after the implementation of the legislation, and Part B examines the correlation between autonomy and the three clusters of institutional, contextual, and political action variables.

Data Collection and Analysis

Part A: Measures of Autonomy: This study defines autonomy as the degree to which the community college is free from fiscal, personnel, and operational controls exerted on it by the local sponsor. The autonomy measures are adapted from regulatory scales developed by Garms (1977), Curry and Fischer (1986), Volkwein (1985, 1986), and Fonte (1988) in six areas: budgeting flexibility; budget form; expenditure oversight; tuition and revenue control; local authority; and personnel administration.

The sources of the autonomy data are two unpublished Institutional Autonomy Surveys of the thirty community colleges: the first, conducted by Hankin in 1988 just prior to the Autonomy Legislation; and the second, a slightly revised version of the same survey, conducted in 1995 by the Local Governance Issues Committee of the community college presidents in this state. The surveys were three part, forced-choice, "yes-no" questionnaires on selected fiscal, personnel, and operational autonomy matters as shown in Table 1. Both

Table 1

FISCAL, PERSONNEL, AND OPERATIONAL AUTONOMY ITEMS ON THE 1988 AND 1995 INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY SURVEYS

Fiscal Autonomy: queried the colleges' authority to:

- Retain interest on all college funds;
- Name their own treasurer;
- Cut checks for financial aid, vendors, refunds, salaries;
- Process all their own contracts;
- Have their own bank account free from sponsor intrusion;
- Make their own investment decisions;
- Do their own purchasing;
- Transfer funds among budget categories without sponsor approval;
- Maintain their own accounting and payroll systems;
- Arrange their own leases without sponsor intrusion.

Personnel Autonomy: queried the colleges' authority related to the faculty and professional staff to:

- Promote faculty without sponsor approval;
- Offer employees fringe benefits different from the sponsor;
- Add faculty lines after budget approval;
- Add administrative lines after budget approval;
- Have the sponsor lack authority to freeze positions;
- Process grievances with faculty without sponsor involvement;
- Bargain directly with faculty.

Personnel Autonomy: queried the colleges' authority related to civil service to:

- Add non-professional lines after budget approval;
- Have the sponsor lack authority to freeze positions;
- Offer employees fringe benefits different from the sponsor;
- Upgrade secretarial positions without sponsor approval;
- Process grievances with civil service staff without sponsor involvement;
- Increase civil service salaries without sponsor approval.
- Bargain directly with civil service;

Operational Autonomy: queried the colleges' authority to

- Use other than the sponsor attorney.

sets of surveys were mailed to the president of each community college, completed by the president often with input from the college's dean of administration, and returned to Hankin. A one hundred percent response was received for both surveys.

For each survey item, a response of "yes" indicated the college had autonomy for that item. A frequency count of positive responses was used to calculate the percent of autonomy for each item. A sector analysis of the survey data was done to determine the nature and extent of the change in fiscal, personnel, and operational autonomy between 1988 and 1995 for three, non-mutually exclusive groups:

Group I: All thirty community colleges;
Group II: The Restricted Plan and Autonomy Plan Colleges;
Group III: The Higher Autonomy and Lower Autonomy Colleges.

Group III is the sample of ten colleges (five higher autonomy and five lower autonomy colleges) for which we compared their autonomy against the three clusters of contextual influences. The group of Higher Autonomy colleges is comprised of five institutions which are Autonomy Plan colleges. The group of Lower Autonomy colleges is comprised of three Restricted Plan and two Autonomy Plan colleges, and represents the five institutions for which, regardless of their fiscal operating system, the sponsors impose the most controls.

Part B: Contextual Influences: Table 2 lists the three clusters of contextual influences that are thought to be correlated to autonomy. Qualitative and quantitative data was gathered on these variables for the five higher autonomy and five lower autonomy colleges in the sample (Group III). The qualitative data was gathered through on-site, one-on-one structured interviews with the college president, chairperson of the board of trustees, academic dean, and administrative dean at each of the ten colleges. The quantitative data was obtained from the 1988 and 1995 Institutional Autonomy Surveys, state university reports, particularly the 1993-94 Annual Report Summary: Statistical Analysis of Revenues, Expenditures, and Fund Balances, and Institutional Fact sheets developed by the researchers.

The qualitative data compared the higher and lower autonomy colleges to determine the degree to which autonomy is correlated to each of the institutional, contextual, and

political action variables. The quantitative data was analyzed using Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation.

Table 2

CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES		
Institutional Characteristics	**Contextual Variables**	**Political Strategies**
Age Size Resource Dependence Mission Historical Development	Location County Government Perceived Quality/Importance State Statutes	Grass Roots Advocacy Media Campaigns Increased Liaison with State Agencies Political Action Committees

Findings of the Study

Part A: The Change in Autonomy: Table 3 shows the change in autonomy among the thirty community colleges for each survey item and lists the items in descending order of autonomy according to the 1995 survey data. The first column of the table indicates the number of colleges with autonomy for each item in 1988 versus 1995. The last two columns show the number of colleges that gained or lost that autonomy between 1988 and 1995, and the net change. The net change reflects the fact that some colleges gained autonomy for a given item while other colleges lost autonomy for that same item. Table 4 shows the percentage point change in fiscal, personnel, and operational autonomy among the three groups examined: all thirty community colleges (Group I); the Restricted Plan and Autonomy Plan colleges (Group II); and the Higher Autonomy and Lower Autonomy colleges (Group III).

Fiscal Autonomy: The findings of the study show a twelve percentage point increase in positive responses in fiscal autonomy, system-wide, from eighty percent in 1988 to ninety two percent in 1995. The most significant increases occurred in the colleges' authority to retain interest on college funds, to name their own treasurer, to have their own bank accounts, to make their own investments, and to transfer funds among budget categories without local sponsor approval. Of the three autonomy areas surveyed, fiscal, personnel, and operational, the fiscal area is the one in which the colleges had the greatest autonomy in 1988 and the one in which they gained the most autonomy between 1988 and 1995.

Table 3

THE CHANGE FISCAL, PERSONNEL, AND OPERATIONAL AUTONOMY BETWEEN 1988 AND 1995

YES 1988/1995	AUTONOMY MEASURES	GAINED/ LOST	NET CHANGE
	Fiscal Autonomy		
26/30	- Retain interest on all college funds;	4/0	+4
24/29	- Name their own treasurer;	6/1	+5
25/29	- Process all their own contracts;	4/0	+4
24/28	- Have own bank account without sponsor	5/1	+4
23/28	- Make their own investment decisions;	5/0	+5
25/26	- Do their own purchasing;	1/0	+1
NA/29	- Cut checks financial aid, vendors, refunds, salaries	NA	NA
20/26	- Transfer funds among budget categories	6/0	+6
NA/26	- Maintain their own accounting and payroll systems;	NA	NA
NA/24	- Arrange their own leases without sponsor intrusion.	NA	NA
	Personnel Autonomy: Faculty & Professional Staff		
28/30	- Promote faculty without sponsor approval;	2/0	+2
19/27	- Offer fringe benefits different from the sponsor;	8/0	+8
NA/26	- Add faculty lines after budget approval;	NA	NA
19/25	- Add administrative lines after budget approval;	7/1	+6
22/22	- Have the sponsor lack authority to freeze positions;	3/3	0
22/22	- Process faculty grievances without sponsor;	4/4	0
16/12	- Bargain directly with faculty.	2/6	-4
	Personnel Autonomy: Civil Service Staff		
12/23	- Add non-professional lines after budget approval;	11/0	+11
22/22	- Have the sponsor lack authority to freeze positions;	3/3	0
13/12	- Offer fringe benefits different from the sponsor;	5/6	-1
11/13	- Upgrade secretarial positions w/o sponsor approval;	6/4	+2
9/12	- Process civil service grievances w/o sponsor;	4/1	+3
8/7	- Increase civil service salaries w/o sponsor approval;	2/3	-1
8/6	- Bargain directly with civil service;	2/4	-2
	Operational Autonomy		
13/15	- Use other than the sponsor attorney.	3/1	+2

YES: Number of colleges with this autonomy in 1988 and 1995
GAINED/LOST: Number of colleges that gained or lost this autonomy between 1988 and 1995
NA: Question not asked in 1988

Table 4

THE CHANGE IN FISCAL AND PERSONNEL AUTONOMY AMONG ALL GROUPS			
	% Autonomy in 1988	% Autonomy in 1995	% Point Change
Fiscal Autonomy			
Group I:			
All Community Colleges (30)	80%	92%	12%
Group II:			
Restricted Plan Colleges (5)	34%	77%	43%
Autonomy Plan Colleges (25)	89%	94%	5%
Group III:			
Higher Autonomy Colleges (5)	95%	98%	3%
Lower Autonomy Colleges (5)	40%	60%	20%
Personnel Autonomy: Faculty and Professional Staff			
Group I:			
All Community Colleges (30)	72%	77%	5%
Group II:			
Restricted Plan Colleges (5)	30%	66%	36%
Autonomy Plan Colleges (25)	81%	79%	-2%
Group III:			
Higher Autonomy Colleges (5)	83%	100%	17%
Lower Autonomy Colleges (5)	30%	63%	33%
Personnel Autonomy: Civil Service Staff			
Group I:			
All Community Colleges (30)	41%	48%	7%
Group II:			
Restricted Plan Colleges (5)	11%	31%	20%
Autonomy Plan Colleges (25)	47%	49%	2%
Group III:			
Higher Autonomy Colleges (5)	68%	88%	20%
Lower Autonomy Colleges (5)	8%	17%	9%

The sector analysis showed that the greatest increase in fiscal autonomy occurred among the five Restricted Plan colleges with an increase of forty three percentage points from thirty four percent in 1988 to seventy seven percent in 1995. As of 1995, however, the group of Restricted Plan colleges remains less autonomous than the group of Autonomy Plan colleges with critical issues yet to be resolved regarding authority to do their own purchasing, to maintain their own accounting and payroll systems, and to make unrestricted transfers between budget categories.

The group of the five Lower Autonomy colleges experienced less of a positive affect from the legislation with only a twenty percentage point increase in fiscal autonomy from forty percent in 1988 to sixty percent in 1995. Although the legislation provided some impetus for change, the long history of sponsor control over these colleges has tended to endure.

Personnel Autonomy: While not the intent of the Autonomy Legislation, per se, the level of personnel autonomy system-wide also increased, but to a lesser extent than fiscal autonomy. Of the personnel matters queried, the colleges had greater autonomy with faculty and professional staff than with civil service staff, and gained more autonomy with this group as a result of the legislation. Significant increases occurred in the colleges' authority to promote faculty without sponsor approval, to offer fringe benefits different from the sponsor, and to add faculty and administrative lines after budget approval, however, these gains were offset by a significant lose in the colleges' authority to bargain directly with the faculty.

Again, the greatest increase in autonomy related to faculty and professional staff occurred among the Restricted Plan colleges with a thirty six percentage point increase from thirty percent in 1988 to sixty six percent in 1995. Unexpectedly, among the Autonomy Plan colleges there was a decrease in autonomy which, although minor (2 percentage point decrease from 81 percent in 1988 to 79 percent in 1995), is interpreted by some to be indications of continued, and in some cases increased, signs of sponsor influence.

In regard to civil service staff, as of 1995, other than the authority to add non-professional lines after the budget has been approved, fewer than half of the colleges have authority to act without sponsor approval to offer their own fringe benefits, to upgrade secretarial positions, to process grievances, and to increase civil service salaries. Similar to

the faculty and professional staff, there was also a marked decrease in the colleges' authority to bargain directly with civil service staff.

Other than the low level of autonomy that the colleges have with civil service, the nature of the autonomy changes that occurred is also revealing. System-wide, while thirty two positive changes occurred, twenty four negative changes also occurred, illustrating the inconsistency in civil service procedures as they apply to the community colleges throughout the state, and strongly supporting Volkwein's observation about the idiosyncratic nature of the regulatory environment (1997).

Operational Autonomy: Organizationally, the community college is a county department; as such it may be mandated to use centralized local sponsor services for matters such as legal representation, personnel management, and purchasing. In the judgement of the college administrators, independent legal representation is one of the most critical of all the autonomy issues facing the community college, and one which lies at the heart of many autonomy disputes between the college and the sponsor. As of 1995, half of the colleges in the study lack the authority to use the attorney of their choice, even in judicial matters that may involve the local sponsor.

Part B: Contextual Influences

Cluster I: Institutional Characteristics: Of the five institutional characteristics examined: age; size; mission; level of resource dependence on the local sponsor; and historical development of the college, the findings of the study show three of the characteristics to be significantly correlated to autonomy: the size; level of resource dependence on the local sponsor, and the historical development of the college.

The strongest correlation in these data exists between autonomy and size (t=-3.596, p<.001), followed by the correlation between autonomy and resource dependence on the local sponsor (t=-2.138, p<.05). Both of these are inverse relationships indicating that the more autonomous institutions tend to be those that are smaller and that receive a lower proportion of their funding from the local sponsor. In the judgement of the college administrators, the historical development of the college is also thought to influence autonomy significantly with the initial organizational structures and operational procedures of the college becoming

increasingly difficult to change over time. According to these data, the age and mission of the college do not significantly influence its autonomy.

Cluster II: Contextual Variables: The four contextual variables examined included: geographic location; the county government; the perceived quality and importance of the college in the local higher education community; and the state statutes, in this case, the Autonomy Legislation. The contextual variables found to be significantly correlated to autonomy include geographic location and aspects of the county government.

The data indicate a significant positive relationship between autonomy and a rural geographic setting. In addition, although only a few of the colleges experience autonomy issues related to the county charter, for those colleges the charter is considered to be a significant influence on autonomy. The perceived quality and importance of the college in the local higher education community, however, is considered by the college administrators in this study to be inconsequential to autonomy.

In regard to the Autonomy Legislation, many administrators think that it did not fully achieve the intended independence of the college. This is evidenced by the fact that only one previously low autonomy college significantly increased its autonomy relative to the other colleges, advancing from being the least autonomous college in 1988 to ranking fifth among all thirty colleges in 1995. In some cases, the legislation is thought to have actually intensified the tension between the college and the local sponsor.

Cluster III - Political Action Strategies: The political action strategies in Cluster III: grass roots advocacy; media campaigns; increased liaison with state agencies; and political action committees, held limited appeal for the administrators of these community colleges. The administrators readily acknowledged that they function in a political environment and that the community college has historically been viewed as inept and inexperienced in the realm of its political leadership. The Autonomy Legislation, however, propelled the colleges into intense, politically-sensitive negotiations with the sponsor to define, or redefine, new autonomy parameters under the Autonomy Plan and prompted the colleges to develop more sophisticated political leadership strategies.

Of the various political strategies now used, most of the colleges share board meeting minutes with the sponsor, and host receptions, legislative dinners, and community focus groups to share information and to garner community support. On an organizational level, official personnel positions have been established to attend specifically to sponsor relations and joint college-sponsor task forces and transition teams have been formed to discuss collaborative rather than confrontational ways to address autonomy issues.

Discussion

Part A: The Change in Autonomy: As intended by the legislation, and as measured by this study, the autonomy of the community colleges increased most significantly in fiscal operations, and to a lesser extent, in personnel and operational matters. System-wide, as of 1995, fiscal autonomy increased twelve percentage points to ninety two percent, personnel autonomy related to faculty and professional staff increased five percentage points to seventy seven percent, personnel autonomy related to civil service staff increased seven percentage points to only forty eight percent, and operational autonomy, measured by the colleges' ability to use other than the sponsor's attorney, increased fifteen percentage points to only fifty percent. The net effect of these autonomy changes translates into increased management flexibility and independent authority among most of the community colleges to manage, to invest, and to retain college funds, and to conduct most personnel matters related to the faculty and professional staff. Management of the colleges' civil service staffs, however, remains predominantly under the control of the local sponsors.

Even with these increases, however, issues of the financial governance and personnel management continue to exist particularly among some of the Restricted Plan and Lower Autonomy colleges that lack authority in such critical matters as the ability to set their own salary and personnel classification systems, and to control their own accounting and payroll systems. These on-going controls perpetuate educators' concerns about the colleges' ability to attract and to retain the most highly qualified personnel, and to have the flexibility to develop new education and training programs in response to emerging marketplace needs.

Additionally, the increased involvement of the local sponsor in the collective bargaining negotiations with the faculty and civil service unions, even among some of the Autonomy Plan colleges, is reason for concern. This involvement provides the local sponsor with access

to influence the terms and conditions of employment, and the size and qualifications of the college faculty, each of which, in turn, has a potential influence on the quality of instruction. Further troublesome, when autonomy disputes escalate to require judicial intervention, half of the community colleges are restricted in their choice of legal counsel, and must use an attorney who is organizationally aligned with the local sponsor.

The tension in the college-sponsor relationship has been likened to that of a parent and rebellious child. The county has little motivation to relinquish authority, while the college, in trying to assert its independence, is mindful of the sponsor's financial support. Furthermore, the apparent success of the community college makes it difficult for the sponsor to understand fully why change is necessary and what the benefits of increased autonomy would be to the county, the college, and the students.

Continued study of the newly-more-autonomous community colleges in this study is underway to determine if and how the increased flexibility improves the productivity of the college, administratively and academically. Findings of increased productivity will serve to focus future autonomy efforts on specific benefits of college autonomy, benefits that legislators and the public can measure and understand.

Four aspects of the survey data reveal additional points of concern: first, the numerous, positive and negative autonomy changes that occurred often for the same survey item; second, the disparity among the autonomy levels of the thirty community colleges; third, the limited increases that were made by the group of Lower Autonomy colleges; and fourth, the fact that only one previously lower autonomy college had significant increases relative to the other colleges. These data illustrate the idiosyncratic nature of regulatory environment, and point to the failure of the legislation to have achieved uniform, state-wide, fiscal and personnel operating systems.

Uniform Fiscal Operating System: It is interesting to consider two contradictory concepts incorporated in the intent of one piece of legislation: to increase the autonomy of the thirty individual community colleges, on the one hand, while also attempting to establish one uniform statewide fiscal operating system, on the other. The findings of this study show that the uniformity is "in name" only.

While the legislation ensured that all the colleges would receive their funds in the same way, through a lump sum transfer from the sponsor, it did not ensure uniformity in the parameters through which those funds could be administered. The objective of the legislation to establish a uniform operating system was not achieved, perhaps because such legislation runs contrary to the very nature and intent of the community colleges to be locally responsive and accountable.

The lack of uniformity under the Autonomy Legislation raises interesting governance questions about the role of the state university as the state coordinating agency. The community college administrators "felt abandoned" by the state university in their autonomy efforts, raising questions about the role of the state university as mediator, arbitrator, negotiator, or advocate in issues that are often as equally related to education as they are to local economic and political conditions. More basic, perhaps, is the question of the practicality of the organizational structure of the community colleges that requires them to report to two masters, one which holds the power of a negotiated budget and wields control far beyond the extent of its financial support.

The lack of uniformity under the Autonomy Legislation also has implications for the study of community colleges. The literature cites at least two major national community colleges autonomy studies, each of which used a sample of one community college per state to be representative of the state's regulatory environment (Carnegie Foundation, 1982; Fonte, 1988). The studies yielded contradictory findings which, upon further investigation, were shown to have been the result of flawed research designs. In each study the autonomy rating of the one community college was erroneously generalized to all community colleges throughout the state. As the findings of this study show, that the lack of uniformity among these thirty colleges precludes the use of such a small sample of community colleges to be representative of an entire state system.

Part B: Contextual Influences: According to these data, the autonomy of the community colleges was found to be significantly correlated to five institutional and contextual variables: the size; the geographic location; the level of resource dependence; the historical development of the college; and for a few colleges, the county charter. Collectively, the higher autonomy colleges tend to be the smaller, rural colleges that are minimally

supported by local sponsor funds. These colleges also tend to have had a history of autonomy from the local sponsor and tend to have had few, if any, limitations imposed upon them from the county charter.

The profile of the higher autonomy colleges as small, rural institutions that are minimally supported by local funds, is consistent with at least one of Volkwein's autonomy studies in the university setting (1986). While he did not find institutional size to be a primary factor correlated with autonomy, he did find support for the Resource Dependence model. Like Volkwein's study of universities, our data show that lower dependence on the environment, in this case lower financial dependence on the sponsor, translates into greater autonomy. In effect, our data show that while the fiscal autonomy of the colleges has increased, the proportion of funding that the colleges receive from government sources has decreased, perhaps reflecting the public's concern about escalating costs, perhaps reflecting a question about the value and outcomes of public higher education, or perhaps reflecting the move toward a more market-driven economy.

Distinguishing among the various factors that may influence the autonomy of a given institution may be as important to the institutional leaders as it is to those, like the faculty, who do not interact as closely with the sponsor. Autonomy issues that derive, for example, from the fact that the college is the second largest employer in the county bring different issues, strategies, and solutions than autonomy issues related to, let's say, the county charter. For the administrators we interviewed, these distinctions are important in focusing their autonomy efforts and in selecting among various strategies. For the faculty, on the other hand, these distinctions are important in helping them understand the complexities of the college-sponsor relationship, and in preserving their confidence in the leadership of the institution in autonomy issues over which the college may have limited control.

Lastly, the political dimensions of the college-sponsor relationship require that college leaders are equally adept and comfortable working in both the political and academic arenas. The political strategies now evident at many of the community colleges can best be described as political - with a small "p". The strategies, in large part, rely on low-key, non-partisan approaches that are intended to build interpersonal communications, to establish trust, to keep the college highly visible in the community, and to keep the sponsor well informed.

Legislators, it is thought, have a limited understanding of the mission of community colleges, typically having had little experience with them in their own education. These low-key strategies that are intended to educate rather than "to pressure" are, perhaps, most appropriate in light of the legislators' limited familiarity.

In short, as long as the sponsor has budgetary control over the college, the autonomy of the college and the nature of sponsor influence will vary given the economic times and the political philosophy of the individuals who make up the legislative body. While the community colleges are often viewed as "the best game in town", they have not successfully translated their benefits to the county into political capital. Regardless of their contribution to the county or their unique educational mission, the community colleges remain vulnerable to the political and economic interests of the local sponsors.

Thus, these colleges need to develop and strengthen their political leadership. Development activities could include state and local level information sharing and political strategy sessions for current academic leaders, executive development programs for new board members, and academic courses and workshops in the politics of higher education for both current and future administrators. The colleges would also benefit by expanding their political base of support and including representatives from their various constituent groups in their political activities. In addition, future research that further explores the political nature of the college-sponsor relationship and the political culture of the institution could provide additional insights to guide the colleges' continuing autonomy efforts.

Conclusions

This is the first longitudinal, multi-method, multi-campus study of autonomy at community colleges within the controlled climate of a single state system. Our study of the thirty community colleges suggests that the connections between state autonomy legislation and real change at the local level are complicated and take time to develop. Understandably, complete autonomy, just as complete accountability, is unattainable and inappropriate in light of legitimate public interest in the funding and the role of public higher education. While the fiscal and personnel autonomy of these community colleges has increased, it has been done in the context of state and local funding that has decreased. The literature contains numerous, yet unsubstantiated, references to the qualitative benefits of campus autonomy and its asserted

positive relationship to institutional effectiveness. But it is also clear that the Resource Dependence Model is at work and that the overall level of funding can make a difference (Volkwein, 1986, 1987, 1989, 1997). Additional multi-campus studies are needed to examine the dynamics of autonomy related influences and institutional effectiveness among community colleges.

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